

GOD'S RAVENS.

BY HAMLIN GARLAND.

CHICAGO has three winds that blow upon it. One comes from the east, and the mind goes out to the cold gray-blue lake. One from the north, and men think of illimitable spaces of pine lands and maple-clad ridges which lead to the unknown deeps of the arctic woods.

But the third is the west or southwest wind, dry, magnetic, full of smell of unmeasured miles of growing grain in summer, or ripening corn and wheat in autumn. When it comes in winter the air glitters with incredible brilliancy. The snow dazzles and flames in the eyes; deep blue shadows everywhere stream like stains of ink. Sleigh-bells wrangle from early morning till late at night, and every step is quick and alert.

But its greatest moment of domination is spring. The bitter gray wind of the east has held unchecked rule for days, giving place to its brother the north wind only at intervals, till some day in March the wind of the southwest begins to blow. Then the eaves begin to drip. Here and there a fowl (in a house that is really a prison) begins to sing the song it sang on the farm, and toward noon its song becomes a chant of articulate joy.

Then the poor crawl out of their reeking hovels on the south and west sides to stand in the sun—the blessed sun—and felicitate themselves on being alive. Windows of sick-rooms are opened, the merry small boy goes to school without his tip-pet, and men lay off their long ulsters for their beaver coats. Caps give place to hats, and men and women pause to chat when they meet each other on the street. The open door is the sign of the great change of wind.

There are imaginative souls who are stirred yet deeper by this wind—men like Robert Bloom, to whom come vague and very sweet reminiscences of farm life when the snow is melting and the dry ground begins to appear. To these people the wind comes from the wide unending spaces of the prairie west. They can smell the strange thrilling odor of newly uncovered sod and moist brown ploughed lands. To them it is like the opening door of a prison.

Robert had crawled down town and up to his office high in the *Star* block after a month's sickness. He had resolutely

pulled a pad of paper under his hand to write, but the window was open and that wind coming in, and he could not write—he could only dream.

His brown hair fell over the thin white hand which propped his head. His face was like ivory with dull yellowish stains in it. His eyes did not see the mountainous roofs humped and piled into vast masses of brick and stone, crossed and riven by streets, and swept by masses of gray white vapor; they saw a little valley circled by low wooded bluffs—his native town in Wisconsin.

As his weakness grew, his ambition fell away, and his heart turned back to nature and to the simple things he had known in his youth, to the kindly simple people of the olden time. It did not occur to him that the spirit of the country might have changed.

Sitting thus, he had a mighty longing come upon him to give up the struggle, to go back to the simplest life with his wife and two boys. Why should he tread in the mill, when every day was taking the life-blood out of his heart?

Slowly his longing took resolution. At last he drew his desk down, and as the lock clicked it seemed like the shutting of a prison gate behind him.

At the elevator door he met a fellow-editor. "Hello, Bloom! Didn't know you were down to-day."

"I'm only trying it. I'm going to take a vacation for a while."

"That's right, man. You look like a ghost."

He hadn't the courage to tell him he never expected to work there again. His step on the way home was firmer than it had been for weeks. In his white face his wife saw some subtle change.

"What is it, Robert?"

"Mate, let's give it up."

"What do you mean?"

"The struggle is too hard. I can't stand it. I'm hungry for the country again. Let's get out of this."

"Where'll we go?"

"Back to my native town—up among the Wisconsin hills and coulees. Go anywhere, so that we escape this pressure—it's killing me. Let's go to Bluff Siding for a year. It will do me good—may bring me back to life. I can do enough

special work to pay our grocery bill; and the Merrill place—so Jack tells me—is empty. We can get it for \$75 for a year. We can pull through some way.”

“Very well, Robert.”

“I must have rest. All the bounce has gone out of me, Mate,” he said, with sad lines in his face. “Any extra work here is out of the question. I can only shamle around—an excuse for a man.”

The wife had ceased to smile. Her strenuous cheerfulness could not hold before his tragically drawn and bloodless face.

“I’ll go wherever you think best, Robert. It will be just as well for the boys. I suppose there is a school there?”

“Oh yes. At any rate, they can get a year’s schooling in nature.”

“Well—no matter, Robert; you are the one to be considered.” She had the self-sacrificing devotion of the average woman. She fancied herself hopelessly his inferior.

They had dwelt so long on the crumbling edge of poverty that they were hardened to its threat, and yet the failure of Robert’s health had been of the sort which terrifies. It was a slow but steady sinking of vital force. It had its ups and downs, but it was a downward trail, always downward. The time for self-deception had passed.

His paper paid him a meagre salary, for his work was prized only by the more thoughtful readers of the *Star*. In addition to his regular work he occasionally hazarded a story for the juvenile magazines of the East. In this way he turned the antics of his growing boys to account, as he often said to his wife.

He had also passed the preliminary stages of literary success by getting a couple of stories accepted by an Eastern magazine, and he still confidently looked forward to seeing them printed.

His wife, a sturdy, practical little body, did her part in the bitter struggle by keeping their little home one of the most attractive on the West Side, the North Side being altogether too high for them.

In addition, her sorely pressed brain sought out other ways of helping. She wrote out all her husband’s stories on the type-writer, and secretly she had tried composing others herself, the results being queer dry little chronicles of the doings of men and women, strung together without a touch of literary grace.

She proposed taking a large house and re-renting rooms, but Robert would not hear to it. “As long as I can crawl about we’ll leave that to others.”

In the month of preparation which followed he talked a great deal about their venture.

“I want to get there,” he said, “just when the leaves are coming out on the trees. I want to see the cherry-trees blossom on the hill-sides. The popple-trees always get green first.”

At other times he talked about the people. “It will be a rest just to get back among people who aren’t ready to tread on your head in order to lift themselves up. I believe a year among those kind simple people will give me all the material I’ll need for years. I’ll write a series of studies somewhat like Jefferies’—or Barrie’s—only, of course, I’ll be original. I’ll just take his simple plan of telling about the people I meet and their queer ways, so quaint and good.”

“I’m tired of the scramble,” he kept breaking out of silence to say. “I don’t blame the boys, but it’s plain to me they see that my going will let them move up one. Mason cynically voiced the whole thing to-day: ‘I can say, “sorry to see you go, Bloom,” because your going doesn’t concern me. I’m not in line of succession, but some of the other boys don’t feel so. There’s no divinity doth hedge an editor; nothing but law prevents the murder of those above by those below.’”

“I don’t like Mr. Mason when he talks like that,” said the wife.

“Well—I don’t.” He didn’t tell her what Mason said when Robert talked about the good simple life of the people in Bluff Siding:

“Oh, bosh, Bloom! You’ll find the struggle of the outside world reflected in your little town. You’ll find men and women just as hard and selfish in their small way. It’ll be harder to bear, because it will all be so petty and pusillanimous.”

It was a lovely day in late April when they took the train out of the great grimy terrible city. It was eight o’clock, but the streets were muddy and wet, a cold east wind blowing off the lake.

With clanging bell the train moved away through the ragged gray formless mob of houses and streets (through which

railways always run in a city). Men were hurrying to work, and Robert pitied them, poor fellows, condemned to do that thing forever.

In an hour they reached the prairies, already clothed upon faintly with green grass and tender springing wheat. The purple-brown squares reserved for the corn looked deliciously soft and warm to the sick man, and he longed to set his bare foot into it.

The boys were wild with delight. They had the natural love of the earth still in them, and correspondingly cared little for the city. They raced through the cars like colts. They saw everything. Every blossoming plant, every budding tree, was precious to them all.

All day they rode. Toward noon they left the sunny prairie land of northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, and entered upon the hill land of Madison and beyond. As they went north, the season was less advanced, but spring was in the fresh wind and the warm sunshine.

As evening drew on, the hylas began to peep from the pools, and their chorus deepened as they came on toward Bluff Siding, which seemed very small, very squalid, and uninteresting, but Robert pointed at the circling wine-colored wall of hills and the warm sunset sky.

"We're in luck to find a hotel," said Robert. "They burn down every three months."

They were met by a middle-aged man, and conducted across the road to a hotel, which had been a roller-skating rink in other days, and was not prepossessing. However, they were led into the parlor, which resembled the sitting-room of a rather ambitious village home, and there they took seats, while the landlord consulted about rooms.

The wife's heart sank. From the window she could see several of the low houses, and far off the hills which seemed to make the town so small and lonely. She was not given time to shed tears. The children clamored for food, tired and cross.

Robert went out into the office, where he signed his name under the close and silent scrutiny of a half-dozen roughly clad men, who sat leaning against the wall. They looked like working-men to him, but they were dangerous people in Mrs. Bloom's eyes.

The landlord looked at the name as

Robert wrote. "Your boxes are all here," he said.

Robert looked up at him in surprise. "What boxes?"

"Your household goods. They came in on No. 9."

Robert recovered himself. He remembered this was a village where everything that goes on—everything—is known.

The stairway rose picturesquely out of the office to the low second story, and up these stairs they tramped to their tiny rooms which were like boxes.

"Oh, mamma, ain't it queer?" cried the boys.

"Supper is all ready," the landlord's soft deep voice announced a few moments later, and the boys responded with whoops of hunger.

They were met by the close scrutiny of every boarder as they entered, and they heard also the muttered comments and explanations.

"Family to take the Merrill house."

"He looks purty well flaxed out, don't he?"

They were agreeably surprised to find everything neat and clean and wholesome. The bread was good, and the butter delicious. Their spirits revived.

"That butter tastes like old times," said Robert. "It's fresh. It's really butter."

They made a hearty meal, and the boys, being filled up, grew sleepy. After they were put to bed, Robert said, "Now, Mate, let's go see the house."

They walked out arm in arm like lovers. Her sturdy form steadied him, though he would not have acknowledged it. The red flush was not yet gone from the west, and the hills still kept a splendid tone of purple-black. It was very clear, and the stars were thick, the wind deliciously soft. "Isn't it still?" Robert almost whispered.

They walked on under the budding trees up the hill, till they came at last to the small frame house set under tall maples and locust-trees, just showing a feathery fringe of foliage.

"This is our home," said Robert.

Mate leaned on the gate in silence. Frogs were peeping. The smell of spring was in the air. There was a magnificent repose in the hour, restful, recreating, impressive.

"Oh, it's beautiful, Robert. I know we shall like it."

"We *must* like it," he said.

First contact with the people disappointed him. In the work of moving in he had to do with people who work at day's work, and the fault was his more than theirs. He forgot that they did not consider their work degrading. They resented his bossing. The drayman grew rebellious.

"Look a-here, my Christian friend; if you'll go 'long in the house and let us alone it'll be a good job. We know what we're about."

This was not pleasant, and he did not perceive the trouble. In the same way he got foul of the carpenter and the man who ploughed his garden. Some way his tone was not right. His voice was cold and distant. He generally found that the men knew better than he what was to be done and how to do it; and sometimes he felt like apologizing, but their attitude had changed till apology was impossible.

He had repelled their friendly advances because he considered them (without meaning to do so) as workmen, and not as neighbors. They reported, therefore, that he was cranky and rode a high horse.

"He thinks he's a little tin god on wheels," the drayman said.

"Oh, he'll get over that," said McLane. "I knew the boy's folks years ago—tip-top folks too. He ain't well, and that makes him a little crusty."

"That's the trouble—he thinks he's an upper crust," said Jim Cullen, the drayman.

At the end of ten days they were settled, and nothing remained to do but plan a little garden and—get well. The boys, with their unspoiled natures, were able to melt into the ranks of the village-boy life at once, with no more friction than was indicated by a couple of rough-and-tumble fights. They were sturdy fellows, like their mother, and these fights gave them high rank.

Robert got along in a dull smooth way with his neighbors. He was too formal with them. He met them only at the meat-shop and the post-office. They nodded genially, and said, "Got settled yet?" And he replied, "Quite comfortable, thank you." They felt his coldness. Conversation halted when he came near, and made him feel that he was the subject of their talk. As a matter of fact, he generally was. He was a source

of great speculation with them. Some of them had gone so far as to bet he wouldn't live a year. They all seemed grotesque to him, so work-scarred and bent and hairy. Even the men whose names he had known from childhood were queer to him. They seemed shy and distant too, not like his ideas of them.

To Mate they were almost caricatures. "What makes them look so—so 'way behind the times, Robert?"

"Well, I suppose they are," said Robert. "Life in these coulies goes on rather slower than in Chicago. Then there are a great many Welsh and Germans and Norwegians, living 'way up the coulies, and they're the ones you notice. They're not all so." He could be generous toward them in general; it was in special cases where he failed to know them.

They had been there nearly two weeks without meeting any of them socially, and Robert was beginning to change his opinion about them. "They let us severely alone," he was saying one night to his wife.

"It's very odd. I wonder what I'd better do, Robert? I don't know the etiquette of these small towns. I never lived in one before, you know. Whether I ought to call first—and, good gracious, who'll I call on? I'm in the dark."

"So am I, to tell the truth. I haven't lived in one of these small towns since I was a lad. I have a faint recollection that introductions were absolutely necessary. They have an etiquette which is as binding as that of McAllister's Four Hundred, but what it is I don't know."

"Well, we'll wait."

"The *boys* are perfectly at home," said Robert, with a little emphasis on boys, which was the first indication of his disappointment. The people, he had failed to reach.

There came a knock on the door that startled them both. "Come in," said Robert, in a nervous shout.

"Land sakes! did I scare ye? Seem so, way ye yelled," said a high-keyed nasal voice, and a tall woman came in, followed by an equally stalwart man.

"How d'e do, Mrs. Folsom? My wife, Mr. Folsom."

Folsom's voice was lost in the bustle of getting settled, but Mrs. Folsom's voice rose above the clamor. "I was tellin' *him* it was about time we got neighbor-

ly. I never let anybody come to town a week without callin' on 'em. It does a body a heap o' good to see a face out the family once in a while, specially in a new place. How do you like up here on the hill?"

"Very much. The view is so fine."

"Yes, I s'pose it is. Still, it ain't my notion. I don't like to climb hills well enough. Still, I've heard of people buildin' just *for* the view. It's all in taste, as the old woman said that kissed the cow."

There was an element of shrewdness and self-analysis in Mrs. Folsom which saved her from being grotesque. She knew she was queer to Mrs. Bloom, but she did not resent it. She was still young in form and face, but her teeth were gone, and, like so many of her neighbors, she was too poor to replace them from the dentist's. She wore a decent calico dress and a shawl and hat.

As she talked, her eyes took in every article of furniture in the room, and every little piece of fancy-work and bric-à-brac. In fact, she reproduced the pattern of one of the tidies within two days.

Folsom sat dumbly in his chair. Robert, who met him now as a neighbor for the first time, tried to talk with him, but failed, and turned himself gladly to Mrs. Folsom, who delighted him with her vigorous phrases.

"Oh, we're a-movin', though you wouldn't think it. This town is filled with a lot of old skinflints. Close ain't no name for 'em. Jest ask Folsom thar about 'em. He's been buildin' their houses for 'em. Still, I suppose they say the same thing o' me," she added, with a touch of humor which always saved her. She used a man's phrases. "We're always ready to tax some other feller, but we kick like mules when the tax falls on us," she went on. "My land! the fight we've had to git sidewalks in this town!"

"You should be Mayor."

"That's what I tell Folsom. Takes a woman to clean things up. Well, I must run along. Thought I'd jest call in and see how you all was. Come down when ye kin."

"Thank you, I will."

After they had gone, Robert turned with a smile: "Our first formal call."

"Oh dear, Robert, what can I do with such people?"

"Gosee 'em. I like her. She's shrewd. You'll like her too."

"But what can I say to such people? Did you hear her say 'we fellers' to me?'"

Robert laughed. "That's nothing. She feels as much of a man, or 'feller,' as any one. Why shouldn't she?"

"But she's so vulgar."

"I admit she isn't elegant, but I think she's a good wife and mother."

"I wonder if they're all like that?"

"Now, Mate, we must try not to offend them. We must try to be one of them."

But this was easier said than done. As he went down to the post-office and stood waiting for his mail like the rest, he tried to enter into conversation with them, but mainly they moved away from him. William McTurg nodded at him and said, "How de do?" and McLane asked how he liked his new place, and that was about all.

He couldn't reach them. They suspected him. They had only the estimate of the men who had worked for him, and while they were civil, they plainly didn't need him in the slightest degree, except as a topic of conversation.

He did not improve as he had hoped to do. The spring was wet and cold, the most rainy and depressing the valley had seen in many years. Day after day the rain clouds sailed in over the northern hills and deluged the flat little town with water, till the frogs sang in every street, till the main street mired down every team that drove into it.

The corn rotted in the earth, but the grass grew tall and yellow-green, the trees glistened through the gray air, and the hills were like green jewels of incalculable worth, when the sun shone, at sweet infrequent intervals.

The cold and damp struck through into the alien's heart. It seemed to prophesy his dark future. He sat at his desk and looked out into the gray rain with gloomy eyes—a prisoner when he had expected to be free.

He had failed in his last venture. He had not gained any power—he was really weaker than ever. The rain had kept him confined to the house. The joy he had anticipated of tracing out all his boyish pleasure haunts was cut off. He had relied, too, upon that as a source of literary power.

He could not do much more than walk down to the post-office and back on the pleasantest days. A few people called, but he could not talk to them, and they did not call again.

In the mean while his little bank account was vanishing. The boys were strong and happy; that was his only comfort. And his wife seemed strong too. She had little time to get lonesome.

He grew morbid. His weakness and insecurity made him jealous of the security and health of others.

He grew almost to hate the people as he saw them coming and going in the mud, or heard their loud hearty voices sounding from the street. He hated their gossip, their dull jokes. The flat little town grew vulgar and low and desolate to him.

Every little thing which had amused him now annoyed him. The cut of their beards worried him. Their voices jarred upon him. Every day or two he broke forth to his wife in long tirades of abuse.

"Oh, I can't stand these people! They don't know anything. They talk every rag of gossip into shreds. 'Taters, fish, hops; hops, fish, and 'taters. They've saved and pinched and toiled till their souls are pinched and ground away. You're right. They are caricatures. They don't read or think about anything in which I'm interested. This life is nerve-destroying. Talk about the health of the village life! it destroys body and soul. It debilitates me. It will warp us both down to the level of these people."

She tried to stop him, but he went on, a flush of fever on his cheek:

"They degrade the nature they have touched. Their squat little town is a caricature like themselves. Everything they touch they belittle. Here they sit while sidewalks rot and teams mire in the streets."

He raged on like one demented—bitter, accusing, rebellious. In such a mood he could not write. In place of inspiring him, the little town and its people seemed to undermine his power and turn his sweetness of spirit into gall and acid. He only bowed to them now as he walked feebly among them, and they excused it by referring to his sickness. They eyed him each time with pitying eyes. "He's failin' fast," they said among themselves.

One day, as he was returning from the post-office, he felt blind for a moment, and put his hand to his head. The world of vivid green grew gray, and life receded from him into illimitable distance. He had one dim fading glimpse of a shaggy bearded face looking down at him, and

felt the clutch of an iron-hard strong arm under him, and then he lost hold even on so much consciousness.

He came back, slowly, rising out of immeasurable deeps toward a distant light which was like the mouth of a well filled with clouds of misty vapor. Occasionally he saw a brown big hairy face floating in over this lighted horizon, to smile kindly and go away again. Others came with shaggy beards. He heard a cheery tenor voice which he recognized, and then another face, a big brown smiling face; very lovely it looked now to him—almost as lovely as his wife's, which floated in from the other side.

"He's all right now," said the cheery tenor voice from the big bearded face.

"Oh, Mr. McTurg, do you think so?"

"Ye-e-s, sir. He's all right. The fever's left him. Brace up, old man. We need ye yit awhile." Then all was silent again.

The well mouth cleared away its mist again, and he saw more clearly. Part of the time he knew he was in bed staring at the ceiling. Part of the time the well mouth remained closed in with clouds.

Gaunt old women put spoons of delicious broth to his lips, and their toothless mouths had kindly lines about them. He heard their high voices sounding faintly.

"Now, Mis' Bloom, jest let Mis' Folsom an' me attend to things out here. We'll get supper for the boys, an' you jest go an' lay down. We'll take care of *him*. Don't worry. Bell's a good hand with sick."

Then the light came again, and he heard a robin singing, and a cat-bird squalled softly, pitifully. He could see the ceiling again. He lay on his back, with his hands on his breast. He felt as if he had been dead. He seemed to feel his body as if it were an alien thing.

"How are you, sir?" called the laughing, thrillingly, hearty voice of William McTurg.

He tried to turn his head, but it wouldn't move. He tried to speak, but his dry throat made no noise.

The big man bent over him. "Want 'o change place a little?"

He closed his eyes in answer.

A giant arm ran deftly under his shoulders and turned him as if he were an infant, and a new part of the good old world burst on his sight. The sunshine streamed in the windows through a wav-

ing screen of lilac leaves, and fell upon the carpet in a priceless flood of radiance.

There sat William McTurg smiling at him. He had no coat on and no hat, and his bushy thick hair rose up from his forehead like thick marsh grass. He looked to be the embodiment of sunshine and health. Sun and air were in his brown face, and the perfect health of a fine animal was in his huge limbs. He looked at Robert with a smile that brought a strange feeling into his throat. It made him try to speak; at last he whispered.

The great figure bent closer: "What is it?"

"Thank—you."

William laughed a low chuckle. "Don't bother about thanks. Would you like some water?"

A tall figure joined William, awkwardly.

"Hello, Evan?"

"How is he, Bill?"

"He's awake to-day."

"That's good. Anything I can do?"

"No, I guess not. All he needs is somethin' to eat."

"I jest brought a chicken up, an' some jell an' things the women sent. I'll stay with him till twelve, then Folsom will come in."

Thereafter he lay hearing the robins laugh and the orioles whistle, and then the frogs and katydids at night. These men with greasy vests and unkempt beards came in every day. They bathed him, and helped him to and from the bed. They helped to dress him and move him to the window, where he could look out on the blessed green of the grass.

O God, it was so beautiful! It was a lover's joy only to live, to look into these radiant vistas again. A cat-bird was singing in the currant hedge. A robin was hopping across the lawn. The voices of the children sounded soft and jocund across the road. And the sunshine—"Beloved Christ, Thy sunshine falling upon my feet!" His soul ached with the joy of it, and when his wife came in she found him sobbing like a child.

They seemed never to weary in his service. They lifted him about, and talked to him in loud and hearty voices which roused him like fresh winds from free spaces.

He heard the women busy with things in the kitchen. He often saw them loaded with things to eat passing his window,

and often his wife came in and knelt down at his bed.

"Oh, Robert, they're so good! They feed us like God's ravens."

One day, as he sat at the window fully dressed for the fourth or fifth time, William McTurg came up the walk.

"Well, Robert, how are ye to-day?"

"First rate, William," he smiled. "I believe I can walk out a little if you'll help me."

"All right, sir."

And he went forth leaning on William's arm, a piteous wraith of a man.

On every side the golden June sunshine fell, filling the valley from purple brim to purple brim. Down over the hill to the west the light poured, tangled and glowing in the bloom of the plum and cherry trees, leaving the glistening grass spraying through the elms, and flinging streamers of pink across the shaven green slopes where the cattle fed.

On every side he saw kindly faces and heard hearty voices: "Good-day, Robert. Glad to see you out again." It thrilled him to hear them call him by his first name.

His heart swelled till he could hardly breathe. The passion of living came back upon him, shaking, uplifting him. His pallid lips moved. His face was turned to the sky.

"O God, let me live! It is so beautiful! O God, give me strength again! Keep me in the light of the sun! Let me see the green grass come and go!"

And his heart went out to his neighbors. Their jocund voices thrilled him. He turned to William with trembling lips, trying to speak.

"Oh, I understand you now. I know you all now."

But William did not understand him.

"There! there!" he said, soothingly. "I guess you're gettin' tired." He led Robert back and put him to bed.

"I d' know but we was a little brash about goin' out," William said to him, as Robert lay there smiling up at him.

"Oh, I'm all right now," the sick man said.

"Matie," the alien cried, when William had gone, "we know our neighbors now, don't we? We never can hate or ridicule them again."

"Yes, Robert. They never will be caricatures again—to me."

